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ABSTRACT

This document addresses the difficulties of urban education, particularly relating to inner cities that contain immigrant and minority students, and argues that schools contribute to the problems of today's urban youth and that schools must do a better job of educating students. It recognizes that schools are burdened by the urban environment but contends that the public cannot wait to change schools until other problems are solved. It grants that someone must address problems, such as poor student health and family instability, but argues that educators have enough to worry about in their own backyards. Better schools will not solve all the problems of American cities, but they are definitely part of the solution. Further, the document argues that: (1) bad public schools are making their own distinct contributions to the problems of cities, (2) there is a substantial consensus among educators and parents about how schools can be made to work for disadvantaged and minority students in the big cities, (3) better inner-city schools are unlikely given today's methods of financing and governance, and (4) better schools are possible in the inner city but only if efforts are made to make a major change in what is meant by a public school. (Contains 19 references.) (GLR)

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The decline of big American cities can be measured by the collapse of their public schools. Before the immigration wave of the late 1980s, the public school systems of the most important U.S. metropolises, including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Houston, had suffered enrollment declines averaging 30 percent, and their student populations had become increasingly poor and welfare dependent. Working and middle class students of all racial and ethnic groups have deserted the big city public schools for suburban and private schools.

Until the 1950s, many big city school systems were among the best in the country. The New York, Chicago, and Boston public school systems, among others, were America's greatest sources of successful and outstanding business leaders, public officials, and scholars. Small town and rural schools were generally considered inferior in teacher quality, classrooms and other instructional resources, and community support. Since that time, however, urban schools have declined dramatically; half the students in big city school systems drop out before high school graduation, four times the national average rate. The majority of students in big city public schools drop behind the national average in reading after the fourth grade and never catch up. Only one-third of the graduates of some big city public high schools can score well enough on the military qualifying tests to enlist in the armed forces.

Since the days of their early success, the big city schools have changed in many ways. Schools built near the end of the 19th century are still in use, and many are suffering from decades of neglect. Spending in city schools, once the highest in the country, is now lower than the statewide average in many states. [1,2] School boards, once staid collections of educated citizens, are now arenas for conflict among the politically ambitious. Most schools are burdened by layer after layer of regulations emanating from board politics, federal

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and state funding programs, and court orders. Teachers are unionized, and their contracts, after decades of bargaining in which school boards made concessions on work rules rather than grant wage demands, constrain any attempt to adapt school programs to new needs.

The combined effect of all these trends is to make big city public school systems weak and inflexible—exactly the wrong characteristics for organizations that must master an exceptionally turbulent situation. City student populations are changing faster than at any time since the turn of the century, and city school budgets are declining even as their student populations increase. Since the 1960s, the student populations of most big cities have changed from majority white to majority Hispanic or black. After a period of enrollment decline caused by “white flight,” many city school populations have grown dramatically due to immigration. Since the late-1980s, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami have collectively enrolled nearly 100,000 new students each year who are either foreign born or children of immigrants. City school budgets are falling as dramatically as their populations are rising. New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles have had to make crippling midyear cuts in their school budgets in each of the last three years. No one knows how much Los Angeles must cut during the 1992–1993 school year, which is about to begin, but a good estimate is \$240 million from a general fund budget of \$2.9 billion plus smaller cuts in state categorical programs and capital funds. [3] Chicago must cut over \$200 million from a budget of \$2.3 billion; according to best estimates, Chicago must continue cutting and will still face a deficit of over \$500 million in the 1997–1998 school year. [4]

It is hard to imagine how any organization could provide consistently good services in such a turbulent environment. Schools must have consistent and predictable funding, and the cuts of the last five years must be restored. But funding is not enough. If funding is used only to restore existing programs, schools will still not be effective for immigrants, for whom existing programs and materials are not appropriate, or for native-born minority students, whom the schools were failing long before the present fiscal crisis began. [3]

Big city schools are also embedded in communities that lack sound economic bases and are burdened by crime, unemployment, teenage

parenthood, child abandonment, drug use, and disease. These problems, too, must be solved if children born in the inner city are to have the educational and career opportunities available to other Americans. The growth and persistence of these problems demonstrate a lack of public and private capacity to give inner-city children a fair shot at life.

In several RAND studies conducted in the past few years, we have interviewed many educators who claim that the schools are helpless in the face of these problems. Nothing can be done, they claim, until the schools get more money and children get better prenatal and health care, better home environments, and more conventional adult role models. Other educators draw a quite different conclusion: that the schools must become comprehensive social service agencies, delivering health, family planning, counseling, and income support services. These respondents may disagree about whether schools should wait for other services or aggressively seek to provide them, but they agree that the real problems are not in the schools but elsewhere and that schools would work if only children were properly cared for by their parents and the broader community.

This chapter makes the contrary argument: that public schools contribute to the problems of today's urban youth and that schools must do a better job of educating students. It admits that schools are burdened by the urban environment but contends that we cannot wait to change schools until other problems are solved. It grants that someone must address problems, such as poor student health and family instability, but argues that educators have enough to worry about in their own backyards. Better schools will not solve all the problems of American cities, but they are definitely part of the solution. The remainder of this chapter argues four points:

- Bad public schools are making their own distinct contributions to the problems of cities.
- There is a substantial consensus among educators and parents about how schools can be made to work for disadvantaged and minority students in the big cities.
- Better inner-city schools are unlikely given today's methods of financing and governance.

- Better schools are possible in the inner city but only if we make a major change in what is meant by a public school.

SCHOOLS MAKE THEIR OWN CONTRIBUTION TO URBAN ILLS

The Rodney King verdict was the spark that ignited the tinder of poor urban neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Those arrested in the ensuing violence were largely young adult males, unemployed and embittered. These conditions are established during the years of children's supposed compulsory attendance in school. Starting in the seventh grade, low-income urban students develop poor school attendance habits; most rapidly fall behind in their classes and eventually fail many. Those students who do attend school regularly learn to standards far lower than those expected by employers and postsecondary training institutions.

RAND studies of inner-city schools in Los Angeles and elsewhere have repeatedly encountered high school juniors and seniors who have never read local newspapers, have no knowledge about the local economic base or the names of major local employers, and do not know the location or significance of local landmarks. [3,5] These children have grown up isolated from the broader community in ghettos that provide few avenues of access to mainstream economic, cultural, and political life. Like the poor minority children whom Coles studied in Northern Ireland and South Africa, the children of our inner cities see government and its political processes as closed and indifferent, likely to do things to them, not for them. [6] They may serve as spectators through radio, television, and movies, but they do not prepare themselves and do not expect to take part in life in environments unlike their own. Aside from the media, such children's contact with the broader society is mainly through the police, whom they regard as a hostile and punitive force, not a source of help or protection. Even those who enter the legitimate economy through jobs in fast-food establishments or small retail stores usually stay in their own neighborhoods and deal mainly with people of similar background.

The school programs that most inner-city minority students encounter do little to remedy their isolation from the broader commu-

nity. As several RAND studies by Oakes have shown, public high schools, especially in urban areas, "track" students on the basis of the motivation and performance levels they display on entering the ninth grade. [7,8] Students with poor attendance records or deficient mastery of basic skills (as is the case with a majority of students in most urban high schools) are typically assigned to remedial drill and practice on reading and arithmetic. Remedial instruction is boring; poorly motivated students seldom learn much from it or persist in it long. Even those students who stick with full-time remedial instruction seldom progress quickly enough to join the regular high school curriculum. Only a few ever take the normal "gatekeeper" courses that prepare students for college and good jobs (e.g., algebra, geometry, English literature, world history, or laboratory science).

Even when remedial instruction does teach students how to read, write, and figure, it does not teach them how those skills are used in adult life. Remedial classes teach skills subjects in isolation from one another and leave it up to the student to see and exploit the connections. Students in such classes do not take part in writing and research projects that give others at least some experience of using skills in combination. [8,9,10,11] Schools in general may do too little to help students learn how to integrate and use what they know, but remedial instruction does nothing to that end.

Urban public schools are also poor places to learn about how adults work in the real world. The only adults whom students observe working on a daily basis are teachers. Yet public schools are a poor model because they are not organized to be productive. They exemplify the kinds of businesses more typical of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s that were either restructured or failed in the 1980s and 1990s. Work is routinized and most workers (teachers) understand only their own duties, not the whole productive process. A few individuals work desperately hard and take responsibility for the results, but they are as likely to be regarded as zealots and nuisances as to be imitated and rewarded. Workers are accountable for following rules, not for contributing to overall success. Top management acts without consulting with workers to use their expertise or gain their support. [5]

Few teachers are concerned with their school's general appearance or climate; even those who are effective in controlling their own

classrooms seldom act in response to disruptions outside their classrooms or obvious student truancy or class cutting. A norm of mutual noninterference also discourages teachers from identifying colleagues who are poorly prepared or who consistently turn out below-par students. [12]

Many teachers think they have no warrant for action beyond their instructional duties and fear (sometimes correctly) that students or other teachers might resent interference. Many urban teachers also exercise "leniency" in dealing with students, lowering standards for behavior and academic attainment. Lenient treatment of students is often well intentioned, motivated by teachers' reluctance to burden students who already have difficult lives. It is often reinforced by administrators' reluctance to back teachers who become controversial because of their demands on students. But the result is an impoverished education, producing students who are not even aware that their behavior and knowledge are insufficient for a successful life in the broader community.

Many teachers and principals think of themselves as administrators of a public agency. They feel responsible to deliver a prescribed curriculum and to respect students' rights as defined by law. As one principal told a RAND researcher, "My job is to make sure this school runs according to the policies and regulations of the _____ school system."

Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers quotes a teacher's statement that encapsulates the problem: "I taught them but they did not learn it." The implication that the teacher is responsible to deliver material, but not to make sure that students master it, demonstrates teachers' bounded responsibility. Student respondents in a recent RAND survey demonstrated this attitude in another way. Several said, "I hate it when the teachers say, 'I get paid whether you learn this or not.'" Teachers may come to these attitudes through years of frustration, but students (and their parents as well as researchers and other outsiders) often see teachers as dutiful only within the letter of their job descriptions.

The nature of teachers' work has important consequences for what students learn about adult life. Students who see teachers executing narrow routines and avoiding collaboration or responsibility for the

results of their work are unlikely to imagine that their own work as adults will require risk taking, solving of unfamiliar problems, shared responsibility, and concern for the ultimate success or failure of the enterprise in which they work. As this author has argued elsewhere, the kind of climate prevalent in urban public schools—high schools especially—teaches students that actions seldom have consequences and that “they,” not “we,” are responsible for making an organization work. [5]

Employers’ complaints about young workers focus more on students’ judgment and responsibility than on their mastery of basic skills. Employer surveys, such as those conducted by the Michigan State Employment Service, and national consultative bodies, such as the Labor Secretary’s Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS), focus on students’ ability to solve problems, interpret general rules in light of particular circumstances, collaborate, and manage interpersonal relations. These skills may require the ability to read and do arithmetic, but they also require accepting responsibility, willingness to tackle the unknown, and adaptation. These actions are seldom taught or modeled in urban schools. The result is that many low-income urban students are unprepared to operate effectively in mainstream adult roles.

WHAT IS NEEDED FROM SCHOOLS

A casual observer of school politics might think that Americans are deeply divided about what makes a good school. The debates about the need for a multicultural curriculum, instruction to maintain immigrant students’ native languages, or teachers’ right to use corporal punishment, represent serious differences of opinion on real issues. But by focusing attention on issues on which people disagree, these debates obscure a broad consensus about the essence of a good school. This consensus is evident from surveys of parent attitudes, from studies of teacher beliefs, and from the results of efforts to design better schools, which demonstrate agreement on a number of key elements of a good school.

- Teachers know their material and present it well.
- Each child is led to learn and accomplish as much as she can.

- Students who fall behind or encounter problems get help.
- The school works as a partner with parents, communicating clearly what their children will experience and why. Partnership means that the school respects parents' concerns and aspirations and that parents support the school's demands on students.
- Adults in the school form personal relationships with children and take responsibility for how well every child learns.
- Adults in the school set good examples of fairness, honesty, and generosity.

Despite the strong consensus on the importance of these factors, few schools provide them all. Two principles of effective schooling underlie this list: the first is concentrating effort on education, not delivery of social services or other noninstructional functions; the second is expecting that students, teachers, and parents will work long and hard and in as many different ways as are necessary to ensure that students learn.

Focus on Education

The first principle of effective schools is that they must educate. Many urban schools have lost their grip on that central fact. Schools must ensure that students have the opportunity to learn the bodies of knowledge that mark an adult in our society. They must also help students understand the world in which they will live and work. That cannot and does not happen in schools whose leaders have become preoccupied with social services. Out of concern for the stresses in students' lives, many urban public schools have become centers for social work and such ancillary services as health care, counseling, infant day care, and housing. Though teachers' time is seldom consumed by these activities, the attention of principals and administrators often is. Principals and senior administrators often spend major parts of their time coordinating the services of nurses and physicians, day care workers for students' babies, psychological counselors, and security officers. Once a school becomes committed to providing such services, administrators must also work constantly to obtain grant funds and maintain the cooperation of provider agencies.

Administrators find these activities rewarding because student benefits are often quick and obvious. School administrators also have more freedom and experience less conflict in dealing with social service agencies than with the school system's central office or the teachers' union. But the result of a preoccupation with social services is that school administrators often leave the instructional program to the teachers. And though many teachers work well without supervision, the result for the school as a whole is that there is no mechanism for setting priorities, establishing collaboration, and evaluating overall performance.

As one commentator recently said about American political parties, if one worries too much about the fringes, after a time the entire enterprise becomes fringe. Schools can easily become holding companies for diverse uncoordinated activities that do not add up. The results, in students' educational experience and in their learning about the nature of productive adult enterprise, have been described above.

Unflagging Commitment

The second principle of effective schooling is what Robert Slavin calls "relentlessness." [13] To beat the odds in dealing with disadvantaged students, schools must never let up. Teachers must keep trying, to the point of working individually with students who are not learning from regular classroom instruction. Parental support must be enlisted to ensure that students attend school every day and complete all their assignments. Students must be pressed to keep working, assured that they, their parents, and teachers can together overcome any obstacles to learning.

The example of urban Catholic schools, many of which now serve disadvantaged minority students drawn from the same population as public school students, is instructive. Catholic high schools, in particular, are built to put students under strong pressure to work and achieve and to ensure that all students encounter the same core of adult materials in English, science, mathematics, and history. They also expressly prepare students for adulthood, ensuring that they understand the local economy and political system well enough to become full participants. As the author has described elsewhere in *High Schools with Character*, the Catholic schools offer students a

demanding bargain. [5] Students, including the many minority students who enter high school academically years behind and with poor junior high attendance records, are told that they must work hard and cooperate with the school's efforts to help them. In return they are assured that they can succeed academically and that the school will do everything in its power to make it so. The schools are accountable to parents, who can register displeasure by taking students out, but they are also aggressive in demanding that parents supervise students and reinforce the schools' demands. Catholic schools also prove their ability to deliver on the bargain by introducing new students to recent graduates who, like themselves, entered high school with grave academic problems.

The focus on instruction and dedication to leading disadvantaged students through a challenging curriculum is built into urban Catholic schools. Many of them were built in the early 20th century to give immigrants a start toward full participation in American life, and they are still staffed and managed expressly for that purpose. But these capabilities are not limited to private schools. Many public schools, including one or a few in almost every inner-city area, avoid the traps of bureaucracy and preoccupation with remedial instruction. Some are renegade schools run by principals who simply defy school boards and unions to disrupt an obviously successful school. Some were also built by school boards and superintendents to attract working white and black families who threatened to leave the public school system. These schools are driven by their missions and by the dedication of their staffs, not by rules. Like the inner-city Catholic schools, they now serve large numbers of students who are several years behind in basic skills. They teach a demanding curriculum, assuming that students faced with real mental challenges and interesting materials can learn basic skills rapidly. Though some students need an intensive first year, including weekend and summer classes from the end of the eighth grade until the beginning of the tenth, virtually all can learn standard high school materials by the beginning of the tenth grade.

Schools built expressly to educate disadvantaged students are distinctive in many ways. Unlike most public schools, they do not assume that students' values, motivations, and abilities are fixed by early adolescence. They set out deliberately to motivate and change students. They do so by setting specific goals for what students

should be able to do when they leave the school and by organizing the whole school around a definite theory or approach to instruction. They teach basic skills and standard academic subjects but integrate them with other experiences designed to prepare students to function as adults in jobs and professions. Students are introduced to the broader community, not isolated from it.

The promises such schools make about what students will encounter while in school and what they can do upon leaving are matched to demands about what the student must do to succeed. Teachers and administrators are not afraid to make demands on students. On the contrary, they assume that students need to work and that rigorous academic demands can put meaning and structure into students' lives. These schools demonstrate the rewards of hard work and build students' self-esteem by showing them that they can meet high standards.

Effective urban public schools are not all alike. Some are career oriented, preparing students for good jobs in particular industries, such as health care, government service, and finance. Some are college prep oriented, but their programs are based on well-defined and integrated approaches, such as TedSizer's "Essential Schools" approach or the International Baccalaureate. [14]

Like inner-city Catholic schools, effective public schools stand for something in particular. They are not work places for groups of autonomous teachers or holding companies for diverse social service providers. They are *schools* where adults and students work together to attain a definite outcome. These schools work. There is an unbroken chain of evidence from the early 1970s until the present that students attending public schools with these characteristics have better attendance records, gain credits more rapidly, take more demanding courses, have higher graduation rates, are more likely to graduate on time, get higher SAT scores, and are more likely to enter four-year colleges. [5,10,14,15]

In most central cities, parents clamor to get their children into such schools. Parents in some localities camp out overnight to be first in line to enroll their children in schools that offer specially focused programs. In New York City, which offers a small number of nonselective "magnet" schools (in addition to the selective magnets like the

Bronx High School of Science), some such schools have 20 and 30 times as many applicants as they have available seats. The schools parents want are in short supply because they differ from the dominant model of regulated and bureaucratic schooling.

HOW THE SYSTEM IS STACKED AGAINST BETTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Why did we get schools that are different from what everyone wants? The answer is complex and, because it lacks a single villain, unsatisfying. We, the adult Americans who vote, pay taxes, and badger or praise elected officials, made them that way. We made them through the gradual accretion of small decisions, not by design. Since the mid-1960s, when schools first became the focus of social policy, they have been subject to layer after layer of rules, regulations, court orders, teacher contract provisions, and other formal rules that bind and delimit what teachers and principals can do. Do schools have too few or too many minority students or does a desegregated school have too many segregated classes? The answer is a rule or court order. Are handicapped children neglected in some schools? The answer is a new legal principle and access to the courts for aggrieved parents. Do some students need extra help in school? The answer is a series of federal and state categorical programs, each with its own set of controls designed to ensure that the services bought with federal and state monies go to the intended beneficiaries and no one else.

Taken one by one, most of these policies and programs seem reasonable. So do the literally hundreds of other rules made by local school boards, state legislatures and state education agencies, Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and federal and state courts. So do the many rules governing when schools open and close, how many minutes teachers may teach, and how a principal may supervise and evaluate a teacher, all agreed to one by one by school boards who chose to make work rule concessions rather than meet teachers' union salary demands. [16] In the aggregate, however, the accretion of rules has created schools that no one would have consciously designed and that do not work.

A highly regulated school system does not work because no one is personally responsible for whether children learn. The people inside the system, teachers, principals, and administrators, are responsible for performing tasks specified by regulations and contracts and for respecting the turf of others. Most teachers and their supervisors care about children, and many complain that their schools are hurt by a few "time servers" who do not work hard and will not cooperate with efforts to upgrade instruction. Poor performers are safe if they can demonstrate compliance and rectitude. Parents and community members who complain about poor results are often told that nothing can be done as long as no rules have been violated. School boards, caught in the web of their own rules, can do little about failing schools. Los Angeles and every other big city has dozens of schools that have abjectly failed students for years, producing several times more dropouts, truants, and semiliterate graduates than the local average. The board or superintendent may take marginal actions (e.g., replacing a principal or adding a new program to supplement the school's inadequate core program). A school is seldom changed fundamentally as long as it complies with all applicable regulations.

Public schools that focus on education and offer their students a specific approach to learning are rare because our system of public control naturally produces a different kind of school. On important matters where school boards are divided, policies are very carefully drawn to satisfy as many people as possible and to compensate pressure groups that lose on one issue with a win on another. The natural result is a system of schools in which all are constrained by the same thicket of requirements.

The foregoing is enough to explain much of the critique of public schools. It certainly accounts for the fact that public schools try to be all things to all people and are unable to develop coherent philosophies of education. Something else is needed, however, to explain why schools in poor areas are usually worse than schools in wealthy ones. District revenues are, of course, part of the picture. Differences in local property tax valuation and the general economic plight of big cities limit the funding available for city schools.

But some of the most striking differences in school quality are evident *within* city school districts. Even with their limited revenue

bases, cities like Chicago and New York are able to create some of the best schools in the country that coexist in the same system with some of the worst. There are two keys to this striking inequality within cities. The first is politics: to hold on to middle class students and demonstrate their commitment to quality, city school systems often create "flagship schools." These schools may or may not get more public funds than others, but the staff members are free to develop instructional themes and adapt curriculum to students' needs. Many of these flagship schools also get support from national foundations and reform networks, which further enhance their independence and flexibility.

The second key to inequality within cities is teacher allocation. Teachers' union contracts with big city public school districts all give senior teachers first choice about jobs and school placements. Not surprisingly, senior teachers tend to congregate in schools located in safe and attractive neighborhoods with supportive parents and responsive students. Schools in less attractive neighborhoods have trouble attracting and keeping senior teachers. They have to accept newer, less-experienced teachers and, in many cases, teachers who lack complete training or who scored poorly on state teachers' exams.

The teacher allocation process leads to staff instability in low-income area schools. Many teachers with good qualifications leave such schools as soon as they have the seniority to do so. It also leads to lower *de facto* funding for poverty area schools. Schools are billed for teacher salaries as if all teachers cost the same amount. But senior teachers cost two and one-half times as much as beginning teachers in most cities. Since over 70 percent of all school costs go for teachers' salaries, schools with all senior teachers can cost nearly twice as much as schools with all junior teachers. The recent settlement of a lawsuit, *Rodriguez v. Los Angeles Unified School District*, may lead to the elimination of some of these funding inequities.

Job protections for senior teachers pose another problem for cities with rapidly changing populations like Los Angeles. As RAND's recent study of immigrant education showed, many schools serving immigrant populations are dominated by teachers who are left over from earlier times when all students were native born.¹⁶¹ During times of budget crisis, school systems can neither create vacancies to

hire new teachers with the appropriate language skills nor change school staffs rapidly as student needs change.

Not all inner-city schools are defeated by these factors. A few schools in every city attract and keep dedicated staff members and work aggressively to meet students' needs. But these schools work despite the system, not because of it. Like all systems, the public schools operate pretty much as they were designed most of the time. The result is that most inner-city public schools are bureaucratic, weak, unlikely to change on their own, and resistant to change from the outside.

In the past few years, superintendents and civic leaders in a number of cities have recognized that their schools were not working and have tried to create an instantaneous reform. They have declared "site-based management" an opportunity for principals and teachers in existing schools to use their own judgment in changing school programs to meet the needs of children. Site-based management plans in places like Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York gave teachers and parents greater influence over school-level decision making. But, as a recent RAND report shows, the roles of the superintendent, school board, and central office bureaucracy did not change. [9] School communities, though urged to change themselves, are still tied up by the same inequitable school budgets, limitations on the use of funds, teacher contract provisions, and central office regulations. Some parent councils in Chicago exercised their authority to fire their principals; others elsewhere found new ways to use the few thousand dollars of flexible equipment and supplies money available to each school. But very few were able to focus on a basic review of the school's performance and devise significant improvements. The existing system had kept its strings on them.

The big city system of governance and finance that produces weak public schools is robust and persistent. Though many teachers and administrators criticize the system, most find their individual jobs safe and tolerable. Civil service protections and union contracts ensure that schools deal fairly and consistently with adults, even if they do not work well for children. The system also deals very efficiently with challenges. Outstanding principals and community leaders can flout convention, but they are isolated and few; when they leave or retire, their schools usually regress toward the systemwide mean. Schools that receive special attention from outside funding sources

and reform leaders are also allowed to distinguish themselves. But they too often become Potemkin villages, protecting the system from criticism by focusing attention on its few excellent schools.

Can a city like Los Angeles create a public school system that is less bound by its rules and adult protections and more able to promote school quality and adaptiveness? The final section in this chapter argues that the answer is yes.

AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

A solution to the problems of today's schools must overcome tendencies that are inherent in the structure of large urban public school systems. An alternative school system must free the schools from micromanagement by the school board and other political bodies; it must remedy the inequities of funding and teacher allocation that exist within most urban districts; it must allow development of schools with specific approaches to education so that staff members can feel responsible for what they produce and parents can hold them accountable; it must force school boards and superintendents to act when they discover that a school is consistently failing its students.

A radical solution preferred by some is school choice based on consumer initiative. [17] The plan would give every child in a locality a voucher worth the current per pupil cost of public schooling. Parents could use the voucher to pay for tuition at any school, public or private. Parents would, presumably, seek out the better schools and avoid the weaker ones. Drawn by the possibility of lucrative tuition payments, entrepreneurs would offer alternatives to unpopular schools. In the long run, weak schools would be eliminated, strong ones would take their place, and all schools would feel the pressure of competition to maintain quality.

A choice plan including private schools raises the spectre of public funds being used to support Catholic and other sectarian schools. Some choice advocates have therefore proposed an all-public choice scheme, in which parents could choose any public school.*

The advantages of school choice are evident in light of the foregoing discussion of public school problems. School boards would not have

to agree on what is the one best model of schooling for all students. Diverse tastes and demands could be satisfied by diverse schools. Schools would compete on quality, but like other sellers of complex services, they would also have to differentiate their product to appeal to purchasers' tastes and loyalty. Parents and students would therefore know what to expect from a school. Though schools could not discriminate in admissions, they could impose requirements related to student attendance and effort. As the research on magnet schools makes clear, students who choose a particular school knowing what it requires (even if they only consider it their least-bad alternative) have a greater incentive to meet its requirements than students who have no choice about where they will go. [5,15]

Schools would be forced to attract students and would therefore pay close attention to student needs and parent preferences. Funding would be explicitly based on attendance, not driven by the locational preferences of senior teachers or political negotiations. Schools would live and die on their reputations; teachers and principals would therefore have a strong incentive to collaborate, to press one another for good performance, to weed out weak staff members, and to work as hard as necessary to build their school's clientele. Like private schools, these schools would have to be concerned about their graduates, whether they could succeed in jobs and higher education and cope with adult life.

But choice plans, whether all-public or public-private, have a glaring problem. Vouchers may increase parents' capacity to demand better schools, but it is not clear where alternatives to the existing bad schools are to come from. Even in New York City, where Catholic schools educate over 100,000 students and constitute the twelfth largest school system in the country, there is no room for the 1,000,000 public school students. If choice is to provide new opportunities for all students, a much larger supply of good schools must be created.

For choice to have any appreciable effect on the quality of schooling in Los Angeles, a massive effort to create new schools or redevelop existing ones would be necessary. That is unlikely to happen purely through private investment. Some investors and community service organizations might venture to start one or two schools each, but only a few are likely to consider troubled central city areas the best

place to start. The demand for better schools is high in inner suburbs and in minority working class areas, but prudent entrepreneurs will start in less challenging environments.

For the foreseeable future, a reform built solely on consumer choice will leave central cities with the problem they started with (i.e., how to create a large enough supply of good schools to serve all students). Choice does not eliminate the need for a strategy to improve public schools.

There are promising approaches to the supply problem. Several national organizations are creating new designs for schools and are building the capacity to help public school systems form new schools (or redevelop existing ones) around these designs. These design organizations are sponsored by foundations such as RJR Nabisco, Macy, and Exxon, and many work out of major universities. Professor Henry Levin runs such an organization at Stanford, and others exist at Harvard, Yale, and Brown. Other design organizations (e.g., Christopher Whittle's Edison Project) are privately sponsored and hope either to work under contract to local school districts or to run private schools with money from education vouchers.

These design organizations could provide the supply side of the market envisioned by choice advocates. They could develop school concepts, test and demonstrate their feasibility and appeal, and then offer them to parents in one or many localities. Like Montessori and the Catholic religious orders, they could ensure that the staff of a school were properly trained to run it and that a competent parent organization was available to monitor quality and help solve problems.

A national effort to create such design organizations is sponsored by the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC), a coalition of business leaders. Among the projects sponsored by NASDC is a Los Angeles-based effort to design an inner-city school that will use older students as tutors for younger ones and focus the efforts of all neighborhood adults on education. Other designs sponsored by NASDC include a school based on old-fashioned character building and study of the classics; schools in which students learn basic skills in the course of research projects; and schools using computers in all phases of instruction. Within three years, NASDC's

design teams will be available to help communities all around the country use its designs to build new schools or redevelop existing ones.

Some public agencies are creating their own design and assistance organizations. The school systems of Philadelphia and New York City are both creating new "theme" schools that take over the buildings of failed neighborhood schools and offer students choices among simple, focused, goal-oriented schools. State governments in Ohio, Oregon, and Wyoming are also developing capacities to help school systems identify and redevelop their weakest schools.

All these organizations are creating alternatives to existing public schools. None seek to become the universal model for all the schools in a locality. They are creating a menu of alternative approaches that school systems can use as they try to improve or redevelop their worst schools. The designers sponsored by NASDC, in particular, intend within five years to offer their services to any school system that wants to adopt one or more of the new designs.

However, with the exception of the efforts sponsored by the New York and Philadelphia schools, new designs for individual schools do not change the ways that public school systems do business. One or two well-designed new schools in inner-city Los Angeles (or several hundred schools nationwide) do not amount to a solution to the problems of urban education. Today's urban public school systems are built to manage large numbers of schools via regulation and compliance enforcement. They are not built to create and nurture a variety of schools or to invest in the redevelopment of schools that have gone bad. Unless we find a new way to govern whole systems of urban schools, the new designs can only slightly increase the number of exemplary-but-not-imitated public schools.

Can we find a way to govern public schools that permits and encourages variety and that moves quickly to supply better schools in place of ones that have failed their students or that nobody wants? Can we build a public school system that nurtures the development of clear, coherent educational approaches in individual schools so that parents have real choices?

A rough blueprint for a public school system that offers the benefits of choice is suggested in David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's new book,

Reinventing Government. [18] They argue that the key to improving schools and other public institutions is to separate governance from the delivery of services. Governance bodies like school boards naturally tend to create uniformity. Because they have formal authority over schools, they find it difficult to resist constituent pressure to settle every problem or complaint with a rule that prevents the offending circumstance from arising again. The result is that a problem that arises in one school leads to rules that constrain all schools—even those in which the problem had either been handled smoothly or had not arisen at all. Because many such problems concern the treatment of employees, public bodies like school boards gradually constrain the schools—and themselves—with elaborate civil service employment rules and union contracts.

Osborne and Gaebler argue that public bodies can be saved from their own tendency to overregulate. Their strategy for separating policy-making bodies from the day-to-day management of services is to have services delivered under contract. Public decision-making bodies can set basic goals and principles of operation (e.g., nondiscrimination in student admissions and teacher hiring), but services will not be delivered by public employees. Services will, instead, be delivered by contractors, operating under limited-term and fixed-cost agreements. Public bodies could retain the right to terminate contracts for nonperformance, and contractors would have no automatic rights of renewal.

Under the contracting scheme, school boards could manage a number of different contracts—with a child development organization for some elementary schools and with a university school of education for others; with an organization like Ted Sizer's Coalition for Essential Schools for some high schools and with a college of arts and sciences or career training academy for others. Nothing would prevent a group of teachers in existing schools from organizing themselves as a contractor. Teachers' unions might offer to run a few schools in one locality; a successful local union might land contracts to provide schools in another school district or even another state.

Public school systems would still need superintendents and some form of a central office, but their roles and powers should be modest. The superintendent's job would be to advise the board on contracting—how to attract good offers; when to warn a failing contractor or

reassign some or all of its schools to other contractors. The school system's central office would support the superintendent in this basic monitoring function, but it would not directly supervise principals or teachers or provide in-service training. Contractor organizations would be responsible for those functions. The school board could set general requirements for teacher qualifications and might even negotiate with contractors and the teachers' union about general wage scales. Contractors could be required to hire teachers from the existing city teaching staff, but they would be able to pick those who best fit their schools' approaches to education. The teachers' union might operate as a guild, helping teachers find placements and trying to upgrade the skills of teachers who could not readily find work.

Contracting may be the framework for the solution of many problems of urban schools. It could, if properly implemented, allow school boards to focus on the core issues of what children need to learn and how to save children from schools that are failing them. It could also relieve school boards of the obligation to resolve every complaint about any aspect of school operations. Contracting with statewide or national design organizations such as those discussed above would force school boards to make an explicit allocation of funds to each school, thus eliminating the current within-district inequities in school funding. Many of the teachers and administrators would come from the current teaching force, but they would work in organizations that must maintain quality and will therefore reward good teachers and retrain or replace ineffective ones.

Schools would remain public: they would be funded from tax dollars and would operate under contracts that guaranteed fair admissions, nondiscrimination, and the rights of the disadvantaged. The state could still establish requirements for teacher certification. Local school boards would be, in effect, public investment managers, deciding which contractor's approach best fits a neighborhood's need. Parental choice would force school boards and superintendents to pay special attention to their shakiest investments. Schools that had become unpopular would lose students and force a reallocation of district funds. When troubled schools became too small to run economically, contractors would be forced either to negotiate for higher per pupil payments or default on their contracts. In either case, the board and superintendent would face an action-forcing event. Even

if the board shirked its duty during the life of a contract, the end of a contractor's term would force a new decision.

A board that could not get contractors to bid on a particular set of schools would know quickly that it needed to offer more money or more realistic terms. This might be a warrant for selectively allocating federal or state categorical program funds. If a school district consistently had trouble attracting contractors for its schools, the state government would have a clear signal that something must be done—a review of the district's contracting methods and specifications, special incentive funding for contractors, or reconstitution of the local school district. Failures would be evident and the remedies would be readily available. There would no longer be any justification for tolerating school failure or for leaving generations of children from inner-city neighborhoods in the same ineffective hands.

Contracting with school design organizations, such as those sponsored by the NASDC, can provide a supply of schools that make parental choice meaningful. It also provides a way out for communities like Los Angeles whose schools have collapsed under the old system. No such dramatic change can be instantaneous, but effective steps can be taken now if community leaders and the school board focus on the worst inner-city schools and commit to redeveloping them via contracts with universities and design organizations that will provide a range of focused alternatives for students.

Contracting for schools will not solve all problems. Some contractors may be inadequate and will have to be assisted by others or fired. Some parents may not exercise their rights of choice aggressively and may unwittingly help deficient schools survive. School boards will have to overcome their tendency to "solve" a problem by enacting a new policy (e.g., a new specification for contractors to meet) rather than by looking into the causes and providing needed resources. But contracting will entirely eliminate two sources of problems for today's public schools. First, it will eliminate the central office bureaucracy that is built to control and regulate schools from the outside, replacing it with a much simpler organization built to assist the board in the selection and audit of contractors. Second, it will eliminate the need for the school board to resolve disputes by making rules that apply to all schools. Parents or interest groups with par-

ticular tastes in schooling can be encouraged to find a school that suits them rather than petitioning for general policy changes.

CONCLUSION

Many things must change before the immigrant and black students of South Central have the same life prospects as the students of Pacific Palisades and Woodland Hills. Schools cannot overcome all the problems of poverty, unemployment, crime, and community disintegration. They also need stable funding, something that only a more responsible state government can provide. But schools can do much more than they are doing.

The public school system must change fundamentally. Enabling changes in state laws and state and federal funding programs are necessary. But the greatest change must be local. School systems must allocate money to schools fairly. School boards, superintendents, and teachers' unions must all change their modes of operation to work with contractors who operate schools. School system central offices would change most dramatically, from regulators of a monopoly enterprise to evaluators and managers of a set of contracts.

None of these changes is likely to come about solely through the initiative of superintendents, school boards, or teachers' unions—the changes they face are too uncomfortable. Broader community initiative, led by the heads of neighborhood and civil rights organizations, local general purpose governments, and key businesses, is necessary. It is obvious that regulation, exhortation, and pressure on the existing school system cannot do the job. Only a concerted community effort to change the way that the community governs education can save the public schools.

NOTES

*In any case, as Elmore has shown, parent choice of schools would require some degree of government administration. Disputes over the fairness of admissions policies and accuracy of schools' claims would inevitably lead to legal action and mandates for government oversight for publicly funded schools. [19]

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